

Army National Guard veteran Andrew Connolly is a man who takes care of his family.

Connolly suffers from spinal cancer, diagnosed in February 2009. Because of the cancer, he will soon lose the use of his legs.

Connolly will use a wheelchair, as will his 1-year-old son, Brody, who was born with a neuromuscular disease and will never be able to walk.

It all puts a lot of pressure on Andrew's wife, Jenny.

"It's all been a huge roller coaster," Jenny said to Tammy Duckworth, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs deputy secretary, during a private meeting Saturday at the Connolly home. Duckworth's Army Black Hawk helicopter was shot down in 2004 in Iraq by an insurgent's rocket-propelled grenade. She was pulled from the wreckage by her crewmates. She lost both legs.

U.S. Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, members of his staff and Iowa Rep. Ray Zirkelbach, D-Monticello, also were at the meeting.

"Andrew's biggest concern has always been the same," Jenny said. "He wants to take care of us."

One of those ways is with a special house, adapted to meet Connolly's needs. But he was meeting resistance.

Zirkelbach served in Iraq with Connolly with the Iowa Army National Guard's Alpha Co., 1st Battalion, 133rd Infantry. The two were among hundreds of Iowa soldiers who served a record mobilization from 2005 to 2007.

"He called me and said, 'Hey buddy, I need your help,'" Zirkelbach said. "He couldn't get through the VA. It wouldn't let him get the house built until he was wheelchair-bound."

Zirkelbach, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, learned what his friend was eligible for through the VA. Braley's staff played a big role in getting the Specially Adapted Housing grant for up to \$63,000.

"It's such a great feeling helping out a friend and a battle buddy," Zirkelbach said.

Connolly plans to use the funds to construct a new wheelchair-accessible home next to his parents' home near Flora Park.

"The VA looked at it, stepped it up and came through," Connolly said. "It was awesome. It was a huge weight off my shoulders. I like to be prepared. It's just crazy how fast it worked."

Braley praised his staff -- Katie Kluever and Pete DeKock -- and Zirkelbach; collectively they were able "to cut through some obstacles to get them (the Connollys) the assistance they needed -- that's what's gratifying to me about serving in Congress."

Jenny said the family receives support from their family and friends, "and people who don't even know us are reaching out to help, and it's overwhelming. Like Andrew said before, our situation isn't ideal, but the support we get is."

And Duckworth speaks from experience.

"It is about taking care of our vets and living up to the covenant that we have with our vets," she said, noting the upcoming Iowa National Guard deployment of about 3,500 people. "We need to make sure that they know they will be cared for and they know that their

representatives -- the people of Iowa are here for them."